

Theories of Meaning, Part II: Philosophical Logic.

Lecture III, *Dummett on Davidson on Theories of Meaning*, 2nd February.

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A theory of meaning tells us what significant parts of our language mean. Theories of meaning are often claimed to also be connected in some way to our linguistic capacity or linguistic knowledge. There being some connection between theories of meaning and linguistic knowledge should be unsurprising. After all, we *know* what our language means. An obvious question is how it is that we know?

1. Theories of Meaning and Knowledge of Meaning

1.1. A direct connection between theories of meaning and knowledge of meaning would be this. Take an adequate theory of meaning T for some language \mathcal{L} . It should be the case that if I know T , then I know what \mathcal{L} means—I know what the words of \mathcal{L} mean, I know how to combine them, and I know what such combinations—further subsentential or sentential constructions—mean.

1.2. It's not clear that this direct connection between theories of meaning and knowledge of meaning is particularly interesting. For instance, contrast a theory of meaning with a theory of, say, tropes. If the theory of tropes is adequate and I know it, then I know what a trope is! Of course, a difference between a theory of meaning and a theory of tropes is that we all know what our language means. This suggests that the direct connection might be better stated: for any adequate theory of meaning T for some language \mathcal{L} , we should be *able to come to know* T and by knowing T , we should know what \mathcal{L} means.

1.3. Does a Davidsonian theory of meaning pass this test? Plausibly not. Recall a Davidsonian theory of meaning for \mathcal{L} is a finitely axiomatized truth theory for \mathcal{L} , issuing as (true) theorems biconditionals of the form 'S is true-in- \mathcal{L} iff p ', for every sentence S of \mathcal{L} . Suppose you don't understand Norwegian. You then find a Davidson theory of meaning for Norwegian. It issues theorems like:

(1) 'Hans elsker edderkoppene' is true-in-Norwegian iff he loves the spiders

Does knowing (1), or indeed knowing the theory within which (1) is a theorem, allow you to understand 'Hans elsker edderkoppene'. That is, from this can you come to substantive knowledge of meaning like:

(2) Hans elsker edderkoppene *means that* he loves the spiders

Plausibly not. Why? Because even if the Davidsonian theory of meaning issues true biconditionals and has true axioms, i.e., a precondition for knowledge is satisfied, you don't know (2) only because you know (1). You must *also* know that the theory is interpretive. Requiring that you know that the theory is interpretive is a non-starter: that's precisely the sort of knowledge that knowing the theory was supposed to get us!

1.4. This framing of the use of a theory of meaning could be questioned. Another thought is that the relevant T-theory theoretically represents the kind of knowledge that a competent speaker tacitly accepts. The T-theory, in this sense, is a model for what grounds our linguistic competence. Michael Dummett in *What is a Theory of Meaning?* (I) is critical of both ways of understanding Davidsonian theories of meaning.

2. Dummett “What is a Theory of Meaning? (I)”

2.1. Getting a theory of meaning which allows us to draw the right connections between what it states and what we know as competent users of the language is not an ideal, further requirement which can be ignored. It's an essential part of what a theory of meaning is supposed to do. As Dummett notes, the role of a theory of meaning for a language is 'to give an account of how that language works, that is, of how its speakers communicate by means of it'. He maintains that 'a theory of meaning is a theory of understanding'—it gives 'an account of ... what it is that someone knows when he knows the language' (p. 3). This isn't the requirement that any good theory of meaning employ the notion of knowledge explicitly. Rather, an account of knowledge of meaning must be derivable from the theory of meaning. Note, as well, that this isn't the requirement that any good theory of meaning must issue direct meaning ascriptions. Such a theory is neither necessary nor, in all cases, sufficient for a theory of linguistic understanding.

2.2. Dummett introduces the distinction between a *full-blooded* and a *modest* theory of meaning. A full-blooded theory of meaning 'seeks actually to explain the concepts expressed by primitive terms of the language' (p.5). In more detail, a full-blood theory of meaning:

[does not] merely explain the concepts expressible in the language, since these concepts may be grasped by someone who is quite ignorant of that particular language, but who knows another language in which they are expressible ... [it] must also associate concepts with words of the language—show or state which concepts are expressed by which words. (Dummett, 1993: 4–5)

In contrast, a *modest* theory of meaning does nothing of the sort. For a modest theory:

...to demand ... that it should serve to explain new concepts to someone who does not already have them is to place too heavy a burden upon it ... all that we can require of such a theory is that it give the interpretation of the language to someone who already has the concepts required. (Dummett, 1993: 5)

One way of drawing this distinction: a modest theory tells us (it states, or allows us to derive) *what* is known by someone who understands the language; a full-blooded theory tells us *how* these facts are known.

2.3. Dummett argues that any adequate theory of meaning must be full-blooded. Why? The thought is that this follows from what it is to give a theory of meaning, as a theory of linguistic understanding. Consider, first, translation manuals. A translation manual systematically pairs sentences of one language with sentences of another. For instance, there's a translation manual—a mapping of sentence to sentence—from French to German. Now, it's clear that *this* is not a theory of meaning: we can translate between two languages without understanding either. We can understand a language with a translation manual only if we understand the language into which it is translated, but this means that a translation manual doesn't tell us anything interesting about what is known by those who understand the first language.

2.4. And likewise, Dummett claims, with a *modest* theory of meaning, it would seem. Such a theory leads only to a grasp of the meaning of the object-language provided we have a prior understanding of the meaning of the metalanguage. This, Dummett claims, is precisely what goes wrong with a Davidsonian theory of meaning—it's modest and this is problematic. After all, how would one derive an understanding of Norwegian from claims like (1) without an understanding of the metalanguage which is English.

2.5. Is this a good objection? Suppose we put to one side the issues we discussed in §1 and instead think that an adequate Davidsonian theory of meaning allows us to derive direct meaning ascriptions, what Dummett calls M-sentences. For instance, suppose we have such a homophonic theory and it tell us:

(3) 'The earth moves' means that the earth moves

If (3) can be derived from the theory, under suitable constraints, then we have a specification of what the sentence 'the earth moves' means. Can we not say that knowing the truth of (3) quite accurately tells us what is known by those who understand English?

2.6. This is where the issues get very subtle. In particular, we should distinguish:

(3*) Someone **knows the truth of** "the earth moves' means that the earth moves'

(3**) Someone **knows that** 'the earth moves' means that the earth moves

(3*) and (3**) are importantly different. In the case of (3*), I know, of a certain sentence, that *it* is true. In the case of (3**), I know that the proposition expressed by "the earth moves' means that the earth moves' is true. Of course, if (3**) is the case, then that someone knows what has to be known in order to understand the sentence 'the earth moves': this tells us precisely what it does mean. However, if (3*) is true, it does not follow that someone knows what has to be known in order to understand the sentence 'the earth moves'. (3*) is knowledge about the truth of a certain sentence. (3*) licenses the person to assert:

(4) The sentence "the earth moves' means that the earth moves' is true

But they can only assert *that* 'the earth moves' means that the earth moves if they also know what the English sentence means. That is, if knowing M-sentences is like (3*), then knowing M-sentences is insufficient for understanding the relevant language; if knowing M-sentence is like (3**), then such knowledge is sufficient for understanding the relevant language, but only if one presupposes the desired knowledge.

2.7. Without already understanding English, the situation in (3*) is no more interesting than what one knows with a translation manual between two languages one doesn't understand. Translation manuals are not theories of meaning. Now, a natural objection is that Davidson never proposed that we can understand a language, or represent the knowledge of competent users of that language, by taking statements like (3) *piecemeal*. Rather, it was that statements like (3) are *derived* from the theory as a whole. Our knowledge of (3) combined with our knowledge that (3) is derived from certain axioms governing subsentential expressions is what suffices for our understanding the relevant language.

2.8. It's not clear that this response will work. The issue discussed in §2.6 replicates itself at the level of the axioms. For instance, consider the following axiom of a Davidsonian theory of English:

(5) 'The earth' denotes the earth

Suppose someone does not know what 'the earth' means. Again, knowing the truth of (5) will not be sufficient for understanding what 'the earth' means. Rather, they must instead know *that* 'the earth' denotes the earth.

What is being attributed to one who knows English is not merely the awareness that that sentence (and others like it) is true, but that awareness taken together with an understanding of the sentence; in other words, a knowledge of the proposition expressed by the sentence (Dummett, 1993: 14).

The situation with (5) is rather like Kripke's (1980: 69) example of 'Horses are called 'horses''. I can accept this simply because I know how 'are called' is used in English and that 'horses' is a meaningful term of English; but I simultaneously might not know what horses are, what 'horses' means—I might not know *which* truth 'Horses are called 'horses'' expresses.

3. T-Theories as Theoretical Models

3.1. One might worry that the previous considerations fail to recognise that a Davidsonian theory of meaning is a *theoretical model* of our practical ability to understand language. Of course, the theory is given in a particular language. But it is a mistake to think that a Davidsonian theory of meaning *T* represents competent users of the language as *accepting T*, as it is written, in the metalanguage. An understanding of nuclear physics doesn't presuppose an understanding of English because the textbook is written in English.

3.2. What should we make of the idea that a T-theory taken as a whole serves as a theoretical model of our practical ability to understand language. One worry is that this leaves the question of what constitutes an individual's understanding of any one particular sentence or word unanswerable:

...there can be no answer to the question ... one can say only that the knowledge of the *entire theory of truth* issues in an ability to speak the language... (Dummett, 1993: 16)

Of course—we might object—any truth theory *does* tell something about the use of individual sentences and words. In particular, an individual's knowledge of a particular sentence is constituted by the relevant T-sentence, connecting the truth of the sentence with the obtaining of the conditions under which it is true.

(6) 'Snow is white' is true iff snow is white

I can—the objection goes—understand 'snow is white' in isolation because I can understand that it should be asserted just in case snow is white! (6), in effect, codifies a natural enough rule for employing that sentence appropriately. Something like, assert 'Snow is white' when the conditions on the right in (6) hold true. However, Dummett finds this claim wanting for the following reason.

Unrecognisable Conditions: It is not the case that the conditions stated on the right hand side of a T-sentence are those which are generally capable of recognizing as obtaining whenever they do in fact obtain. T-sentences like (6) could ground our capacity to use individual sentences only if the conditions on the right hand side can be generally recognised as obtaining, if they obtain. Otherwise, T-sentences would not ground rules to guide our linguistic capacity, only rules which did no guiding at all.

3.3. A separate issue for taking a T-theory as a whole as a theoretical model of our practical ability to understand language is that it leaves little room to understand *disagreements over meaning*. As seems to be often the case, two can disagree over the truth conditions of a sentence, but not its meaning, or simply just disagree over the meaning. In the latter case, if our theory of meaning just is a truth-theory, then disagreement over meaning *is* disagreement over truth conditions. This worries Dummett:

...a theory of meaning which denies in principle the viability of the distinction [between disagreement over truth-value and meaning] runs the risk of becoming solipsistic. A disagreement between individual speakers of the same language at the same time either cannot be accounted for at all, or should be explained by attributing to them divergent theories of truth of the language ... If the latter course is taken, we lose the conception of the linguistic community: a language, considered as determined by a theory of meaning, becomes something spoken by a single individual at a certain period. (Dummett, 1993: 18)

References

- Dummett, Michael (1993). What is a Theory of Meaning? (I). In: *Seas of Language*. Oxford University Press.
Kripke, Saul A. (1980). *Naming and Necessity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.